

ALL THE WORLD'S A STAGE: A CRITICAL ENGAGEMENT WITH  
THE EXEGESIS OF ROMANS 1 IN CALVIN AND BARTH

Do human beings possess a natural knowledge of God? More specifically, are human beings able to acquire knowledge of God through observation of the created world? Against the overwhelming majority of the Christian theological tradition, as well as his fellow dialectical theologian Emil Brunner, Barth answered these questions with a resounding *Nein!* in 1934. In the course of their debate, both Barth and Brunner sought to claim John Calvin – paragon of the Reformed theological tradition – as their ally. While subsequent scholarship has generally concluded that both Brunner and Barth were more or less mistaken in their interpretation of Calvin on this point,<sup>1</sup> this does not at all mean that the matter can be laid to rest. For all the attention directed at understanding the relation between Barth and Calvin on the possibility of natural knowledge of God, there is one avenue of investigation that has not yet been explored, namely, the relation of Barth and Calvin's exegesis of Romans 1.18-20. In a very real sense, the difference between Barth and Calvin on the question of the possibility of a natural knowledge of God is inextricably linked with their exegesis of Romans 1.

“[N]o theologian since John Calvin has been more committed to biblical exegesis than Karl Barth.”<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, both endeavored to maintain an integral connection between their

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<sup>1</sup> For one appraisal of the debate between Barth and Brunner with reference to Calvin, see Edward A. Dowey, *The Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), 265-7.

<sup>2</sup> Richard E. Burnett, *Karl Barth's Theological Exegesis: The Hermeneutical Principles of the Römerbrief Period* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 9.

exegesis and their theological work, although they went about this in different ways. On the one hand, Calvin conceived of his *Institutes* – at least after 1539 – as a “repository of *loci communes* and *disputations* that might otherwise have appeared in [his] commentaries.”<sup>3</sup> Barth, on the other hand, regularly includes extensive fine-print exegetical excursions within his *Church Dogmatics*. This provides the structure of what will follow. I begin with a discussion of Calvin’s exegesis of Romans 1.18-20 in his 1540 *Commentary on Romans* before looking at Calvin’s discussion of this passage in the *Institutes*. Next, Barth’s exegesis of the passage in *Church Dogmatics* I/2 and especially II/1 will be examined in their theological context. The relation of Barth and Calvin’s understandings of this passage and the broader question of natural knowledge of God will then be examined. Finally, I will conclude with a constructive suggestion founded upon the metaphor of creation as a “most glorious theater”<sup>4</sup> and aimed at staking out an understanding of the created world’s witness to its Creator that is faithful to the leading concerns of both Calvin and Barth.

### Calvin on Romans 1

Before looking at Calvin’s exegesis in his commentary on Romans, it will be helpful to gain a broad understanding of Calvin’s exegetical technique. Of primary methodological import for

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<sup>3</sup> Richard A. Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin: Studies in the Foundation of a Theological Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 119. The intimate relation between Calvin’s commentaries and the *Institutes* has become widely recognized in recent Calvin scholarship. McKee provides a singularly helpful and comprehensive formal description of Calvin’s work when she writes, “Calvin understood his chief task to be the faithful exposition of Scripture. For him this had two main parts: the *Institutes*, conceived as a catechism or an introduction to Scripture organized according to the humanist *loci communes* principle, and the individual commentaries and sermons which explained particular biblical texts.” Elsie Anne McKee, “Some Reflections on Relating Calvin’s Exegesis and Theology,” in *Biblical Hermeneutics in Historical Perspective: Studies in Honor of Karlfried Froehlich on His Sixtieth Birthday*, ed. Mark S. Burrows and Paul Rorem (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 216-7.

<sup>4</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols., Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1960), 1.6.2.

Calvin is the notion of “lucid brevity,”<sup>5</sup> which Calvin extols as the aim of his commentary in the dedicatory epistle to Grynaeus. Calvin hopes to set forth the meaning of the biblical text with as little distraction as possible. This is not merely a stylistic or aesthetic point, however, for it is meant to serve what Calvin takes to be the task of the exegete: “[I]t is almost his only work to lay open the mind of the writer.”<sup>6</sup> Calvin employs to this end all the tools furnished to him by his humanistic training. Attention to the verbal and grammatical aspects of the biblical text, as well as its textual and historical context, consistently marks Calvin’s exegesis. It is further important to remember that, for Calvin, accessing the mind of the writer of Scripture does not stop with the mind of Paul, in the case of Romans, but extends to God’s authorship as well. As Greene-McCreight puts it, in light of “Calvin’s understanding of the biblical text as inspired, searching for author intentionality means listening for the voice of the Divine Author speaking through the text.”<sup>7</sup> It is because Calvin understands God to be the author of Scripture that Calvin is able to engage the biblical text also in terms of its theological and canonical context.

With this overview of Calvin’s exegetical method in place, it is further important to note what serves as Calvin’s overarching interpretive framework in his commentary on Romans. Indeed, Calvin makes his interpretive strategy clear to us in the second paragraph of his opening discussion of the epistle’s argument, describing “the main subject of the whole Epistle” as “justification by faith.”<sup>8</sup> This soteriological emphasis becomes very clear in Calvin’s comments

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<sup>5</sup> John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, trans. John Owen, Calvin Translation Society ed., Calvin’s Commentaries (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2003), xxiii.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> K. E. Greene-McCreight, *Ad Litteram: How Augustine, Calvin, and Barth Read The "Plain Sense" Of Genesis 1-3* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2005), 120. Parker expresses even more strongly the unity that Calvin saw between God’s authorship and the human authorship of Scripture: “[I]f the expositor reveals the mind of the writer as it is expressed in the text, he is revealing at the same time the mind of the Spirit.” T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries*, 2nd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster, John Knox Press, 1993), 96.

<sup>8</sup> Calvin, *Romans*, xxix. Demson puts this slightly differently: “Calvin’s exposition of Romans is organized around the theme of the mercy of God in Christ as the central meaning of the gospel.” David Demson, “John

of Romans 1.16-17. In response to Paul's description of the gospel as the power of God unto salvation, Calvin affirms "that power shines forth in the gospel," that "the gospel is a display of [God's] goodness," that this power unto salvation "speaks not...of any secret revelation, but of vocal preaching," and that "By setting forth one salvation [Paul] cuts off every other trust." Furthermore, Calvin takes the revelation of the righteousness of God found in verse 17 to be an affirmation of all this, saying that "we cannot obtain salvation otherwise than from the gospel, since nowhere else does God reveal to us his righteousness," and explaining more fully that "this righteousness, which is the groundwork of our salvation, is revealed in the gospel: hence the gospel is said to be the power of God unto salvation."<sup>9</sup>

Calvin's soteriological focus continues in his treatment of verses 18-20,<sup>10</sup> but the soteriological aspect shifts. Rather than focusing on the positive side, the gospel and its offer of salvation, Calvin now focuses on the negative side, humanity's inexcusable failure to make use of the knowledge of God that can be gleaned from observation of the created world. Rather than maintaining that the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, Calvin now discusses the wrath of God elicited by this failure. Interestingly, and unlike his discussion of the revelation of God's righteousness, Calvin does not identify the source of the revelation of God's wrath. In any case, the primary point is that "man was created to be a spectator of this formed world, and that eyes were given him, that he might, by looking on so beautiful a picture, be lead up to the Author himself." Still, because of sin what should have been the case is not the case, although enough perception remains to condemn us "before God's tribunal." Calvin sums up:

[L]et this difference be remembered, that the manifestation of God, by which he makes his glory known in his creation, is, with regard to the light itself, sufficiently clear; but

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Calvin," in *Reading Romans through the Centuries: From Early Church to Karl Barth*, ed. Jeffrey P. Greenman and Timothy Larsen (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2005), 137.

<sup>9</sup> Calvin, *Romans*, 62-6.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 66-71.

that on account of our blindness, it is not found to be sufficient. We are not however so blind, that we can plead our ignorance as an excuse for our perverseness.<sup>11</sup>

The revelation of God in nature remains unimpaired even when we, because of sin, can perceive only enough of it to render us guilty for idolatrous and otherwise improper worship of God.

Still, some basic knowledge of God's existence continues to arise through the observation of the created world even in humanity's sinful state. It is "hazy, imperfect, half-buried, yet still present."<sup>12</sup>

This position is maintained when Calvin treats this topic in his *Institutes*. While Calvin also discusses an innate sense of God resident within the human person (*sensus divinitatis*) as well as knowledge of God that is discernable through God's providential rule over the created order, Romans 1.18-20 comes into direct play only in his discussion of God's revealing and continual disclosing of "himself in the whole workmanship of the universe."<sup>13</sup> It is "in vain that so many burning lamps shine for us in the workmanship of the universe," however, because "the fault of dullness is within us" and therefore the fact that "men soon corrupt the seed of the knowledge of God, sown in their minds out of the wonderful workmanship of nature...must be imputed to their own failing."<sup>14</sup> The same pattern holds that was seen in Calvin's Romans commentary, namely, that knowledge of God is available through observation of the created order, but that this knowledge has been severely restricted by human sin. That is, it has been

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 71.

<sup>12</sup> T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1959), 9. Steinmetz notes that this distinction between what is available to us and what we actually receive (in this case, perceive) is a fundamental distinction for Calvin employed, among other places, in his understanding of the sacraments. See David C. Steinmetz, *Calvin in Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 32.

<sup>13</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, respectively: 1.3, 1.5.6-8, 1.5.1.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 1.5.14-5. Parker comments on the influence of Calvin's exegesis of Romans 1.18-20 on the discussion of natural knowledge of God in the *Institutes*: "It is this passage above all which lies behind and directs Calvin's thinking here." T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin: An Introduction to His Thought* (Louisville, KY: Westminster, John Knox Press, 1995), 16.

rendered insufficient for the right worship of God, although it is sufficient to render us responsible for our failings.

It is certainly not the case that this abortive natural knowledge of God that nonetheless makes us responsible for our failure to worship God rightly serves no salvific function. Calvin clearly states that it is because “Paul’s object was to teach us where salvation is to be found” that “Paul shows that the whole world is deserving of eternal death.”<sup>15</sup> Recognition of humanity’s culpability paves the way for reception of the gospel. In this way, Calvin’s discussion of this ultimately insufficient and yet convicting knowledge of God parallels his understanding of the place of the Law in the order of salvation. Following Augustine explicitly and Luther implicitly, Calvin writes that the “wickedness and condemnation of us all are sealed by the testimony of the law,” and that, “naked and empty-handed,” humanity ought to “flee to [God’s] mercy, repose entirely in it, hide deep within it, and seize upon it alone for righteousness.”<sup>16</sup> Both the Law and observation of the created world serve the soteriological function of making humanity aware of God and culpable for failing to render proper worship to God, so that that salvation offered in the gospel of Jesus Christ might be received. As Dowey puts it, the revelation of God in nature “has a teaching value, just as the law does in its function of ‘schoolmaster’.”<sup>17</sup>

In summary, Calvin affirms knowledge of God through observation of the created world in his treatment of Romans 1.18-20 both in his Romans commentary and in the *Institutes*. This knowledge, however, is severely impaired by sin such that its only function is to render humanity without excuse before God’s judgment. Positively, however, recognition of the failure of this knowledge of God functions, as does the Law, as an impetus to reception of the gospel. Thus, both negatively and positively, Calvin’s treatment of this natural knowledge of God is

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<sup>15</sup> Calvin, *Romans*, 68.

<sup>16</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.7.8.

<sup>17</sup> Dowey, *Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology*, 83.

soteriologically driven. Indeed, Calvin's discussion seems oriented toward salvation history, or perhaps better, the chronology of salvation.<sup>18</sup> Adam possesses knowledge of God through observation of the created order, sin enters into the picture and severely distorts this knowledge until it can do nothing but render humanity guilty and drive us toward the gospel in a manner that parallels the history of Israel and her Law.

### Barth on Romans 1

It is important to begin by saying something about the great historical chasm that separates Barth from Calvin, namely, the Enlightenment. The difference made by the Enlightenment can be illustrated with reference to Ludwig Feuerbach, who argued forcefully and in many ways persuasively in 1841 that "the nature of faith, the nature of God, is itself nothing else than the nature of man placed out of man, conceived as external to man," or that "God is the manifested inward nature, the expressed self of a man."<sup>19</sup> In other words, the notion of "God" is a construction of human consciousness whose content is nothing more than the idealization of

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<sup>18</sup> The organization of Calvin's *Institutes* supports this reading. Parker notes that, as opposed to the catechetical ordering of the 1536 edition, the *Institutes* of 1539 "is now formally orientated towards the Bible." T. H. L. Parker, "John Calvin: A Biography," (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 97. Muller has sought to more precisely elucidate this orientation, arguing that the 1539 edition of the *Institutes* is patterned upon the structure of Romans, at least in terms of Calvin's understanding of Paul's epistle as organized around justification by faith. As Muller describes the movement from the 1536 to the 1539 editions, "The argumentation of the *Institutes* in 1539, from a structural perspective, ought to be described...as an integration of the catechetical topics and order with the topics and order of Pauline soteriology." Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin*, 130. Of course, Paul's schema – beginning as it does with an indictment of the Gentiles (chapter 1) followed by a similar indictment of the Jews (chapter 2) before it culminates with an explication of the gospel (chapter 3 and following) – mirrors that presented to us in the Old Testament. In view of this, it is interesting that Stephen Edmondson has argued that the 1559 edition of the *Institutes* is structured not only on Romans (he generally accepts Muller's thesis concerning the 1539 edition) but finally in light of Calvin's Old Testament commentaries. "[W]hat emerges," Edmondson tells us, "is a picture of the first two books of the *Institutes* shaped by Calvin's reading of the biblical history as it is expansively outlined in the history of God's covenant with Israel and concluded in the history of Christ's gospel." Stephen Edmondson, "The Biblical Historical Structure of Calvin's *Institutes*," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 59, no. 1 (2006), 3. The most important point to realize for the purposes of this essay is that Calvin's thought is increasingly characterized by soteriological chronology.

<sup>19</sup> Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Eliot (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1957), 338-9, 12-13. It is worth noting that Feuerbach appears as the paradigm of "the modern doctrine of God" against which Barth contends. See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, trans. and edited by Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Thomas F. Torrance, 4 volumes in 13 part vols. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956-75), II/1, 292f.

human nature. It is certainly true that Feuerbach sounds much like Calvin, who affirms that “just as waters boil up from a vast, full spring, so does an immense crowd of gods flow forth from the human mind.”<sup>20</sup> The difference between Calvin and Feuerbach is that while the first believes that these projections of the human consciousness are founded upon an real although woefully distorted perception of the true God’s existence, the latter does not. It is ultimately Kant’s philosophy that establishes the basis for this divergence. As Van Der Kooi explains, “Kant’s philosophy is an salient example of the anthropologisation of human knowledge. Knowledge is a product of the human mind.”<sup>21</sup> Humans can acquire no knowledge of God from the natural world because, even if a revelation of God waited there, the conceptual constructs that serve to link our minds with external reality are understood as constructed by our minds, and are thus unable to transcend human subjectivity. Van Der Kooi rightly notes that “Barth...does not retreat from this anthropologisation” of knowledge.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, Barth’s dogmatis can be understood as a theological end-run around this problem.

Theology, Barth tells us, while it requires the exercise of human mental capacity, is not finally dependent upon human possibility for its truth. Instead, the truth of theology “*setzt...den christlichen Glauben*” because “*Der Glaube erkennt Gott.*” This faith is not here some new human power that allows us to grasp God but is grounded in “*die gnädige Zuwendung Gottes zum Menschen*” and consists, on the human side, of hearing and obedient response. And yet, even the reality of our hearing and obedient response “*steht je und je bei Gott und nicht bei uns.*”<sup>23</sup> What we find here is knowledge of God that is not dependent on human ability, but that

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<sup>20</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.5.12.

<sup>21</sup> Cornelis Van Der Kooi, *As in a Mirror: John Calvin and Karl Barth on Knowing God*, ed. Robert J. Bast, trans. Donald Mader, vol. 120, *Studies in the History of Christian Traditions* (Boston: Brill, 2005), 238.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 239.

<sup>23</sup> *KD* I/1, 16-18; *CD* I/1, 17-18: “demands the Christian faith,” “Faith knows God,” “the gracious gift of God to humanity [Rev],” “always rests with God and not with us.”



comes to the human being from God. Furthermore, this knowledge is a given for the theologian that must be presupposed rather than critically achieved. Theology is here pursued in the mode of *fides quarens intellectum*, although the phrase does not appear,<sup>24</sup> and that means that theology assumes that revelation has taken place. Indeed, the remainder of this part volume is concerned with parsing the relationship between revelation, understood in its threefold form as grounded in Jesus Christ and mediated by Scripture and church proclamation (§4), and theology as well as with exploring what can be known of God's Triune being on the basis of the actuality of revelation.

The second part volume of the *Church Dogmatics* takes a closer look at God's revelation. It is broken down into a section on the incarnation and a section on the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit, which is followed by an examination of the human witnesses that arise in response to that revelation, namely, Scripture and church proclamation. The first of Barth's exegetical treatments of Romans 1.18-20 that concern us in this essay is found in the context of his discussion of the illuminating work of the Spirit and, more specifically, within Barth's treatment of religion in §17. Barth understands human religion as an attempt at self-justification. In sum, "*Religion ist Unglaube*."<sup>25</sup> God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ passes this judgment upon religion, and Barth is clear that this includes the Christian religion: "*Christ, Jude und Muselmann*

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<sup>24</sup> Anselm's name, however, does appear. See *KD* I/1, 18; *CD* I/1, 18-19. Barth lectured on Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo?* during the summer of 1930, and began lecturing on the *CD* I/1 material during the summer of 1931. See Bruce L. McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development, 1909-1936* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 415-6. Barth's book on Anselm appeared in 1931, and McCormack has shown that "the Anselm book is at most a relatively more faithful unfolding of the dogmatic method which Barth had been employing since 1924" (441). This method reaches the height of its theoretical expression, at least in Barth's hands, in the theological epistemology of *Church Dogmatics* II/1.

<sup>25</sup> *KD* I/2, 327; *CD* I/2, 299: "Religion is unbelief." A recent re-translation of this section translates "unglaube" as "faithlessness," which seems to better get at the active aspect of what Barth is trying to describe. There is not merely neglect, but active resistance to and rejection of God. "[I]n religion, man resists and closes himself off to revelation by creating a substitute for it." Karl Barth, *On Religion: The Revelation of God as the Sublimation of Religion*, trans. Garrett Green (London: T & T Clark, 2006), 59. It is interesting to note Green's comment in his introduction that, in assessing the substitutes that humanity makes for itself in religion, "Barth comes close to Ludwig Feuerbach's theory of religion (which he always took seriously) as the objectification of human ideals" (17).

*als solche... haben nichts voreinander voraus und haben sich gegenseitig nichts vorzuwerfen."*

In the face of these attempts of human beings to establish their own right before gods of their own creation, God's self-revelation can only be destructive. Revelation "*widerspricht ihr, wie zuvor die Religion der Offenbarung widersprach, sie hebt sie auf, wie zuvor die Religion die Offenbarung aufhob.*"<sup>26</sup> Revelation's contradiction of religion is not, however, the last word since Barth will go on to describe the way in which religion is reconstituted as a result of its contradiction by revelation. Barth is not content to simply consider religion in terms of the cross, but examines it in light of the resurrection as well<sup>27</sup>. However, it is with reference to revelation's contradiction of religion that Barth turns to exegete Romans 1.

Barth begins his treatment of this passage by commenting on the revelation of God's righteousness in verse 17, which he identifies with the person and work of Jesus Christ. Because Jesus, Israel's Messiah, was rejected and crucified by those to whom he revealed himself, "*hat er sich als der Herr der ganzen Welt offenbart.*" Barth is quick to note that this does not mean the

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<sup>26</sup> KD I/2, 325, 331; CD I/2, 298, 303: "Christian, Jew and Mussulman as such... have no advantage over one another and have no real fault to find with one another," "It contradicts it, just as religion previously contradicted revelation. It displaces it, just as religion previously displaced revelation."

<sup>27</sup> The heading for §17 is "*Gottes Offenbarung als Aufhebung der Religion,*" and *Aufhebung* is a very important term for Barth's understanding of the relation of nature and grace. Taking "sublimation" as his preferred translation of this term, Green briefly discusses its meaning in the introduction to his new translation of this paragraph, noting that "Barth means two things by saying that revelation is the sublimation of religion: (1) that Christians, on the basis of God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ must say a resounding *no* to human religion; and (2) that on the same basis they may also say a qualified *yes* to religion." Barth, *On Religion*, 11.

Although not working explicitly from §17, Hunsinger delves a bit deeper in his conceptual analysis of *Aufhebung* and the relation between nature and grace that it characterizes. This relation is understood in terms of a three-part process: "nature is subjected by grace to a kind of *Aufhebung*, in the sense that nature is affirmed, negated, and then reconstituted on a higher plane. In its distinction as a reality other than and over against grace, nature is affirmed. In its corruption as a reality that supposes itself to be autonomously grounded apart from grace, nature is negated. In its destiny as a reality to be drawn beyond itself into genuine fellowship with grace, the negation is negated, and nature is miraculously reconstituted on a higher plane." George Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth: The Shape of His Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 98.

Barth's rejection of natural theology, which comes to full expression in *Church Dogmatics* II/1, becomes more clear in the light of this understanding of how grace and nature relate. Hunsinger makes this clear as well: "Natural theology... presupposes what Barth takes to be an impossible understanding of nature and grace. It presupposes that grace exists alongside nature, in the sense that nature is understood to have its own independent, autonomous, and self-grounded capacity for grace (at least in part or ostensible part)" (97). This is precisely the sort of relation between nature and grace that is negated in Barth's understanding of *Aufhebung*.

outpouring of an indiscriminately universal grace, but the gathering in of all people to the responsibility and accountability (*Verantwortung und Rechenschaft*) of Israel. Because all people are now thus accountable, all people are susceptible to the charge of apostasy (*Abfalls*). In this way, “*Eben die rettende Offenbarung der Gerechtigkeit Gottes ist...auch die Offenbarung des Zornes Gottes über die Gottlosigkeit und Unbotmäßigkeit der Menschen.*”<sup>28</sup> Thus, Barth reads the revelation of God’s righteousness in verse 17 and the revelation of wrath in verse 18 as two sides of the one revelation of Jesus Christ. Similarly, Barth’s reading of verse 20 is that it is on the basis of the self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ that all people are rendered unexcused and inexcusable (*Unentschuldigte, Unentschuldbare*).

In light of this overarching interpretation, what does Barth have to say about the sort of knowledge of God arising from observation of nature for which this passage has long served as support? Barth handles this aspect of verse 20 by arguing that Paul calls creation as a witness against the Gentiles only “*in und mit der Verkündigung Christi.*” Further, the witness of creation is awakened within and made valid against the Gentiles on the basis of this preaching. It on the basis of Jesus Christ’s revelation that Gentiles are told “*daß der Mensch Gott - nicht aus sich selber, aber kraft Gottes Offenbarung - von der Schöpfung...kennt und also weiß, daß er sich ihm schuldig ist.*” Barth is clear in his exegesis that there is no knowledge of God that arises from observation of the created world outside of that which comes by God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ. However, in the light of this revelation and when one is confronted by preached witness to it, the created world takes up its rightful place as a witness to its Creator. Thus, for Barth, it must be remembered that “*diese so oft als Erlaubnis oder Aufforderung zu allen möglichen*

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<sup>28</sup> *KD* I/2, 332; *CD* I/2, 304: “He has revealed Himself as the Lord of the whole world,” “Even the saving revelation of the righteousness of God is...also the revelation of the wrath of God against the ungodliness and insubordination of humanity [Rev].”

*natürlichen Theologien verstandenen Worte sind in Wirklichkeit...Bestandteil des apostolischen Kerygmas.*<sup>29</sup>

That which is most distinctive of Barth's exegesis now becomes clear, namely, its theological orientation. Although not on display in this section aside from a few brief references to the Greek text, Barth was as concerned with the verbal, grammatical and historical aspects of the biblical text as was Calvin. However, while McCormack has shown that Barth "was not at all interested in setting historical-critical study [of the biblical text] aside," Barth was concerned with practicing a "more nearly theological exegesis."<sup>30</sup> This is no different from Calvin in and of itself, for Calvin also practiced theological exegesis. The difference between Barth and Calvin on this point resides in the sort of theological exegesis practiced. As was seen in the above discussion of Calvin's exegesis of Romans 1, Calvin's theological interpretation proceeded from a soteriological center. Barth's above exegesis of Romans 1, however, is characterized by a christological orientation.<sup>31</sup> It is Jesus Christ himself, not merely the salvation that he acquired

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<sup>29</sup> *KD* I/2, 334, 335, 334; *CD* I/2, 306, 307, 306: "in and with the preaching of Christ," "that humanity knows God from the creation – not of themselves, but by the power of God's revelation – and knows also that they are indebted to God [Rev]," "the very words which are so often understood as an opening or a summons to every possible kind of natural theology are in reality a constituent part of the apostolic *kerygma*." Richardson is therefore not quite right when he writes of Barth's exegesis in this section, that "Barth acknowledges the revelation of God in creation but reminds us how emphatic Paul is that no one...has held fast to this knowledge of God." Kurt Anders Richardson, *Reading Karl Barth: New Directions for North American Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 124-5. As is seen above, it is only the preached witness to God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ that establishes the created world as a supporting witness.

<sup>30</sup> Bruce L. McCormack, "Historical Criticism and Dogmatic Interest in Karl Barth's Theological Exegesis of the New Testament," *Lutheran Quarterly* 5, no. 2 (1991), 211.

<sup>31</sup> The distinction between Calvin's soteriologically oriented exegesis and Barth's christologically oriented exegesis is similar Muller's distinction between three forms of christocentrism in Christian theology. See Richard A. Muller, "A Note On 'Christocentrism' And the Imprudent Use of Such Terminology," *Westminster Journal of Theology* 68 (2006). The first form in Muller's typology is "Soteriological christocentrism" that "presents the theological affirmation of the absolute and necessary centrality of Christ to the work of salvation" (255). The third form "is characterized by the understanding of Christ (rather than Scripture and God) as both *principium essendi* and *principium cognoscendi theologiae*," that is, it takes what Muller calls the "Christ-idea" and uses it "as the interpretive key to understanding and elucidating all doctrinal topics" (256). Muller identifies Calvin with the first form and Barth with the third, and in this he seems to be basically correct. However, our designation of Calvin's theological exegesis of Romans 1 as soteriologically oriented is meant to indicate his constant concern to understand the salvation achieved for us in Jesus Christ as the culmination rather than the foundational starting point of the salvation history as it spans both biblical Testaments.

on our behalf, that sets the terms for Barth's interpretation. Barth's exegesis of Romans 1 is undertaken within the larger theological context of God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ and, for that reason, Barth is not willing to grant to certain of Paul's statements any sort of independent or abstract validity. The affirmation that knowledge of God arises through observation of the created world is not, therefore, something true for all human beings as such – which is Calvin's assumption made on the basis of a very common-sense reading of this passage<sup>32</sup> – but is true only as derivative of God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ. Such knowledge of God is not for Barth an independent affirmation, nor even as with Calvin a relatively independent affirmation then shown to be soteriologically insufficient. Only “the self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ [is] for Barth the Bible's subject-matter, content, and theme.”<sup>33</sup>

Turning now to *Church Dogmatics* II/1, one finds in the opening paragraphs (§25-7) Barth's most rigorous conceptual analysis of the knowledge of God. This theological epistemology stands in continuity with that found in earlier volumes and discussed briefly above. It is a meticulous application of the *fides quarens intellectum* pattern, which begins from within the sphere of God's self-revelation and seeks to clarify – on the basis of what is known of God – how it is that God can be known. As Barth tells us, “*Es geht nicht um die Frage: ob Gott in der Kirche erkannt wird?*”<sup>34</sup> The conceptual principle at work here is the affirmation that actuality

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<sup>32</sup> Zachmann notes that, “The role of context in revealing the mind of the author is best seen when Calvin interprets texts with obscure meaning.” Randall C. Zachman, *John Calvin as Teacher, Pastor, and Theologian: The Shape of His Writings and Thought* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 109. Since context does not play a significant role in Calvin's treatment of Romans 1.18-20 it is reasonable to conclude that the meaning of this material seems sufficiently obvious to Calvin to prevent the need for recourse to contextual considerations. For Barth, on the other hand, the common-sense meaning of this passage was anything but simple, and so he understandably turned to contextual considerations, not least of all by linking the revelation of God's righteousness in verse 17 to the revelation of God's wrath in verse 18.

<sup>33</sup> Burnett, *Karl Barth's Theological Exegesis*, 80. Though Burnett's treatment engages Barth's thought during the early 1920's, this point is only strengthened over the course of Barth's mature work. For example: “If we now question Holy Scripture about the reality of God's revelation, to which it claims to bear witness...we obtain from it the answer that Jesus Christ is this reality.” *CD* I/2, 10.

<sup>34</sup> *KD* II/1, 2; *CD* II/1, 4: “It is not a question [of] whether God is actually known in the Church.” Importantly, Barth writes in the very next sentence, which is actually fine-print, that “I learned the fundamental

establishes possibility, and that since God is actually known, it is possible for us to know God: “*Wo Gott erkannt wird, da ist er so oder so auch erkennbar. Wo die Wirklichkeit ist, da ist auch die entsprechende Möglichkeit.*” There is no room here for independent critical analysis of whether or not God is known, but only of exploring the questions of “*inwiefern wird Gott erkannt?*” and “*inwiefern ist Gott erkennbar?*”<sup>35</sup> Answering these questions is precisely what Barth sets out to do in his theological epistemology.

Barth tackles the first of these questions in the remainder of §25. His discussion of the way in which God is known is complex. This knowledge of God is bound to the revelation of the Word of God and, as such, is a mediated knowledge. Although God presents Godself to humanity as an object to be known, God’s objectivity is not identical with the objectivity of revelation’s medium. Thus, knowledge of God is knowledge of faith which believes that God’s secondary objectivity – though not identical to the primary objectivity by which God knows Godself – “*ihre Entsprechung und ihren Grund hat*” in God’s primary objectivity. That Barth is thinking through these things in terms of a sacramental pattern is clear, and precisely for this reason he feels the need to affirm that humanity stands always in need of grace. We only know God as God gives Godself to be known. God’s giving of Godself to be known in mediated form is God’s part. For our part, the knowledge of God means obedience – a human activity that faithfully corresponds to God’s activity. This obedience is the obedience of faith, and “*Eben als dieser Gehorsamsakt und nur als dieser Gehorsamsakt ist Gotteserkenntnis Glaubenserkenntnis und damit wirkliche Erkenntnis Gottes.*”<sup>36</sup>

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attitude to the problem of the knowledge and existence of God which is adopted in this section...at the feet of Anselm of Canterbury.”

<sup>35</sup> *KD* II/1, 3; *CD* II/1, 5: “Where God is known He is also in some way or other knowable. Where the actuality exists there is also the corresponding possibility,” “in what way is God known [Rev]?” and “in what way is God knowable [Rev]?”

<sup>36</sup> *KD* II/1, 16, 27; *CD* II/1, 16, 26: “has its correspondence and basis,” “Precisely—and only—as this act of obedience, is the knowledge of God knowledge of faith and therefore real knowledge of God.”

The question of how God is knowable occupies Barth in §26, which he divides into two sections: first, he discusses the readiness of God to be known by humanity, and second, he discusses the readiness of humanity to know God. This structure reinforces what is a point of utmost import for Barth, namely, that God is in control of our knowledge of God. In terms of readiness, this means that God must be ready to be known before humanity can be ready to know God. The doctrine of the Trinity has an important role to play here: “*erkennen wir Gott, daß Gott sich selber erkennt...Daraufhin ist er auch uns erkennbar: daß er als der dreieinige Gott zuerst und vor Allem sich selbst erkennbar ist.*”<sup>37</sup> There is a divine self-knowledge that is part of the inner life of the Trinity, and – Barth goes on – our knowledge of God participates in this self-knowledge, although not immediately but in the mediate form of God’s self-revelation.

Jesus Christ is where the readiness of God to be known intersects with human readiness to know God, or – perhaps better – he is the point where the readiness of God to be known creates the corresponding readiness of humanity to know God. In Barth’s words, “*der Bereitschaft Gottes eingeschlossene Bereitschaft des Menschen ist Jesus Christus.*” In Jesus Christ we are confronted with the eternal Son of God as a human being, which is to say, the presentation to us of the self-knowledge of the triune God in mediate form: “*In unserem Fleische erkennt Gott sich selber. In ihm geschieht es also, daß unser Fleisch Gott selber erkennt.*” We participate with Jesus Christ, and thereby share in the self-knowledge of God in its mediate form, through the work of the Holy Spirit that gives rise to our life of faith. Thus, God’s readiness to be known becomes our readiness to know God. In Jesus Christ, “*stehen wir nicht draußen,*

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<sup>37</sup> *KD* II/1, 73; *CD* II/1, 67-8: “we know God in consequence of God knowing Himself...Because He is first and foremost knowable to Himself as the triune God, He is knowable to us as well”

*sondern drinnen...In ihm gilt es nicht nur für Gott selbst, nicht nur zwischen dem Vater und dem Sohne, in ihm gilt es für den Menschen, für uns: Gott ist erkennbar.”*<sup>38</sup>

This, then, is how Barth understands, on the basis of our actual knowledge of God through God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ, the possibility of our knowledge of God. Because he is working from our actual knowledge of God to its possibility, Barth’s treatment of this possibility is concerned throughout with God’s grace. God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ takes the form of reconciliation, and must therefore be understood as grace:

*In ihm ist der Mensch - nachdem und indem seine Feindschaft gegen Gottes Gnade in ihm überwunden ist - nicht mehr draußen, wo ihm Gott unerkennbar sein muß, weil er die Gnade nicht annimmt, in der Gott sich ihm erkennbar macht, sondern drinnen, wo Gott sich selber erkennbar ist, der Vater dem Sohne und der Sohn dem Vater, wo im Sohne Gott also auch ihm, dem Menschen, erkennbar ist.*<sup>39</sup>

Barth has recognized that a full consideration of the possibility of revelation and the knowledge of God cannot be pursued without reference to reconciliation, for they are two sides of the same coin, namely, Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ reveals God through achieving reconciliation, and he achieves reconciliation by revealing God. In effect as well as intention, Barth has elaborated an understanding of the knowledge of God in keeping with the logic of justification by grace alone which, for Barth, ultimately means Christ alone. This is brought out neatly by Barth himself:

*“Gott uns in seiner **Gnade**, und weil in seiner Gnade, darum ganz **allein** in seiner Gnade erkennbar ist.”*<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> *KD* II/1, 167, 169; *CD* II/1, 150, 151: “the readiness of man included in the readiness of God is Jesus Christ,” “In our flesh God knows Himself. Therefore in Him it is a fact that our flesh knows God Himself,” “we do not stand outside but inside...In Him the fact that God is knowable is true not only for God Himself, not only between the Father and Son, but for man, for us.”

<sup>39</sup> *KD* II/1, 172; *CD* II/1, 153: “In Him the enmity of man against the grace of God is overcome, therefore man is no more outside, where God must be unknowable to him because he does not accept the grace in which God makes Himself knowable to him. He is inside, where God is knowable to Himself, the Father to the Son and the Son to the Father, where in the Son, therefore, God is also knowable to him, man.”

<sup>40</sup> *KD* II/1, 193; *CD* II/1, 172: “God is knowable to us in His grace, and because in His grace, only in His grace.” The emphasis noted above is found in the German text, but not in the English. Furthermore, Chalamet has noted that “In Barth’s ‘No’ to Brunner’s defense of natural theology (1934), Barth drew the consequences of



In keeping with these considerations, Barth's rejection of natural theology, and similarly of any possibility of any independent knowledge of God arising from the observation of the created world, is proffered on both methodological and material grounds. Methodologically, such purported knowledge of God does not begin from actual knowledge of God based upon God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ. It thus betrays the method of *fides quarens intellectum*. Materially, the pursuit of such purported knowledge of God, precisely because it does not begin from actual knowledge of God based upon God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ, ignores the affirmation that knowledge of God is entirely a matter of grace. Rather than submitting to the reconciliation and revelation found in Jesus Christ, such purported knowledge of God rejects God and pursues instead "*Selbstausslegung und Selbstrechtfertigung*."<sup>41</sup>

There is, however, a further material point against natural theology or the possibility of independent knowledge of God arising on the basis of observing the created world. When viewed from within the actual knowledge of God founded on God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ, it becomes apparent that there are no analogies within the created world to God's nature and being (*Sein und Wesen*) as Lord, Creator, Reconciler, or Redeemer. To be sure, we know other lords, creators, reconcilers, and redeemers, but these all fall short when compared to the content of our actual knowledge of God. At the close of this discussion, Barth includes a critical analysis of the *analogia entis*, which he rejects in favor of "*einer durch Gottes Gnade zu*

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'justification by faith alone' for the realm of knowledge." Christophe Chalamet, *Dialectical Theologians: Wilhelm Herrmann, Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann* (Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2005), 258. Such a drawing of consequences, though on a much larger scale, would be a fair way to characterize the understanding of the knowledge of God that Barth has elaborated here in *CD II/1*. As Hart describes it, "Humans, Barth insists, can no more contribute anything to...knowledge of God...than they can bring anything to the throne of grace in order to secure divine favour. On both counts they are effectively bankrupts, and must cast themselves on the mercy and grace of God poured out in his Son." Trevor Hart, *Regarding Karl Barth: Toward a Reading of His Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 150.

<sup>41</sup> *KD II/1*, 151; *CD II/1*, 136: "self-interpretation and self-justification." Self-justification is also an important theme in Barth's treatment of religion in *Church Dogmatics I/1*. The parallels between Barth's treatment of natural theology in *II/1* and his treatment of religion in *I/1* are very interesting in this regard, and warrant further study.

*schaffenden Analogie, der Analogie der Gnade und des Glaubens.*”<sup>42</sup> There is analogy in Barth, but it is not analogy that works from below to above by constructing purported knowledge of God upon some aspect of the created world. Rather, “the direction in which the analogy works is always ‘above to below’,” and where the “capacity needed for the analogy is one which God Himself graciously provides.”<sup>43</sup>

It is at this point that Barth’s second treatment of Romans 1.18-20 with which this essay is concerned presents itself. Having rejected natural theology for methodological and material reasons, Barth turns to address those passages of Scripture that seems to suggest that natural theology or an independent, natural knowledge of God is possible and ought to be pursued. He rejects this apparent conclusion, however, and argues instead that “*die heilige Schrift weder vor die Notwendigkeit stellt, noch uns auch nur die Möglichkeit gibt, mit einer nicht in und mit seiner Offenbarung gegebenen, nicht an sie gebundenen Erkennbarkeit des Gottes der Propheten und Apostel...zu rechnen.*”<sup>44</sup> Although Barth exegetes numerous difficult passages on the way to this conclusion, Romans 1.18-20 plays – along with many of the Psalms – an important part.

Barth’s exegesis of Romans 1 in *Church Dogmatics* II/1 is very similar to his treatment of it in I/2. Again, Barth ties together the revelation of God’s righteousness in verse 17 with the revelation of God’s wrath in verse 18 and locates both in Jesus Christ. The revelation of God’s wrath is the shadow side (*Schattenseite*) of God’s righteousness without which the revelation of that righteousness is unintelligible. Furthermore, as revelation, the revelation of God’s wrath adds something new to the equation both for Jews and Gentiles: “*Von demselben Golgatha her, wo es offenbar wurde, daß die Juden ihr eigenes Gesetz nie gehalten haben, wird es klar, daß*

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<sup>42</sup> *KD* II/1, 92; *CD* II/1, 85: “an analogy to be created by God’s grace, the analogy of grace and faith.”

<sup>43</sup> McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 17.

<sup>44</sup> *KD* II/1, 138; *CD* II/1, 125: “Holy Scripture neither imposes the necessity nor even offers the possibility of reckoning with a knowability of the God of the prophets and apostles which is not given in and with His revelation, or bound to it.”

*auch die Heiden sich an Gott von jeher nicht minder verantwortlich versündigt haben.*” From this vantage point it can be seen that God has always been revealed to the Gentiles in the created world and that they are no less guilty of idolatry (*Götzendienstes*) than the Jews for suppressing the truth of God available to them. In the face of this realization, the Gentiles are confronted with the fact that “*sie trifft der Zorn Gottes nicht als ein blindes Schicksal*” but “*er sie von rechtswegen trifft.*”<sup>45</sup>

It must be remembered, however, that this recognition of guilt on the part of the Gentile does not arise on the basis of some reflection independent of Jesus Christ. As Barth says, “*Das Alles wird nicht aus den Heiden heraus katechesiert als Inhalt eines Wissens, das sie an das Evangelium schon heranbringen,*” rather, “*vom Apostel Jesu Christi verkündigte Offenbarungswahrheit ist.*” As such, it cannot be extracted from its place within the sphere of revelation to serve as a timeless, general, or abstract truth (*zeitlose, allgemeine, abstrakte Wahrheit*). In other words, though it is objectively the case that the created world in some sense reveals God, this revelation is only accessible from within the sphere of God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ. God’s self-revelation or its presuppositions are being read into and not out of humanity in the cosmos (*Menschen im Kosmos*). Barth does not deny that “*dem Menschen im Kosmos Erkenntnis Gottes und damit Gott Erkennbarkeit zugeschrieben.*” But this knowledge of God and knowability of God are, for Barth, securely located in God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ. Although Barth momentarily dabbles in form criticism and admits that perhaps Paul is here making use of a fragment from an unknown secular author, he is adamant that it be interpreted not as though it stood alone, but in terms of its place in the witness to God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ borne by the apostle Paul in his epistle to the Romans. Within this

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<sup>45</sup> *KD* II/1, 133; *CD* II/1, 120-1: “From this same Golgotha where it is revealed that the Jews have never kept their own Law, it becomes clear that the heathen also have always sinned no less responsibly against God,” “the wrath of God does not come as a blind fate” but “it comes upon them justly.”

context, “*Paulus redet...nicht von den Heiden an sich und im Allgemeinen*,”<sup>46</sup> but as they are confronted by the revelation of the righteousness of God in Jesus Christ.

What can be said, on the basis of Barth’s exegesis of Romans 1 here in *Church Dogmatics* II/1, about the possibility of knowledge of God arising from observation of the created order? It is clear that Barth admits that this passage does affirm a kind of objective witness that the created world bears to its Creator. However, it is equally clear that Barth understands this witness to be closely connected with God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ. The objective witness of the created world is only recognized from within the sphere of God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ. It is only in the light of Jesus Christ that the witness of the created world can be encountered. Light is an apt metaphor here. The human eye does not see light as such, but light reflected off of things. In the same way, we do not know God immediately in God’s primary objectivity, but only through God’s self-revelation in the secondary objectivity of mediate forms. Jesus Christ’s human nature is the constitutive and definitive mediate form, and is therefore the lens through which the light of God’s self-knowledge shines into the created world. As God’s self-revelation shines into the created world from this center in Jesus Christ, it reflects off of things that have always been present but have not before been seen in this light, as it were. The presence of the created world as witness to God is, thus, illumined by the light of God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ, and we who live within this created world must admit that while we did not perceive this witness, it was there all along. Macintosh sums up Barth on this

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<sup>46</sup> *KD* II/1, 133, 131; *CD* II/1, 121, 119: “[A]ll this is not, so to speak, catechized out of the heathen as the content of a knowledge which they apply to the gospel,” rather, “it is the truth of revelation proclaimed by the apostle of Jesus Christ;” “knowledge of God is here ascribed to man in the cosmos, and knowability is ascribed to God,” “Paul is not...speaking of man in the cosmos in himself and in general [Rev].”

point with the related metaphor of blindness: “what God has written of Himself into Nature can only be...read by those whose eyes have been opened by the great revelation in Jesus.”<sup>47</sup>

### **Theologians in Conversation**

It is apparent at this point that there are both similarities and differences in Barth and Calvin’s exegesis of Romans 1.18-20. Among the similarities are those in the exegetical methodology employed. Both theologians are interested in verbal, grammatical, and historical questions and, in Barth’s case, this extends to historical critical method as demonstrated by his brief foray into form criticism. Moreover, both theologians complement these more basic textual concerns with theological concerns. Differences arise, however, insofar as the theological concerns of each theologian differs. The most basic form of the difference between Barth and Calvin in their interpretation of Romans 1 pertains to the extent of sin’s effect on human ability to perceive the witness of the created world to its Creator. As has been seen, Calvin thought that enough perception remained to render humanity culpable for failing to properly worship God. For Barth, living after Kant and Feuerbach, knowledge of God obtained on the basis of human ability could only be understood as false, as idolatry, and as an attempt at self-justification. There can be no question of establishing the actuality or possibility of the knowledge of God, but only of *fides quarens intellectum*. God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ, then, supplies both the actuality and possibility of knowledge of God. From within the light of Jesus Christ we can see that God is the Creator, that the created world bears witness to its Creator, and that all humanity is therefore guilty of idolatry. For Calvin, a shred of perception remains to us; for Barth, we only perceive when confronted by the luminescence of God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ.

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<sup>47</sup> Hugh Ross Mackintosh, *Types of Modern Theology: Schleiermacher to Barth* (London: Nisbet and Company, Ltd., 1945), 147.

While Barth interprets Romans 1.18-20 from a center in christology, Calvin does so from a center in soteriology. This is not to say that Barth's interpretation is not soteriological. As was noted above, Barth has brought revelation together with reconciliation as the two aspects of Christ's person and work. Indeed, he makes this explicit immediately following his exegesis of Romans 1 in *Church Dogmatics I/2*: "*Die Offenbarung ist als Gottes Selbstdarbietung und Selbstdarstellung die Tat, durch die er den Menschen aus Gnade und durch Gnade mit sich selber versöhnt.*"<sup>48</sup> Both revelation and reconciliation, then, are anchored in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Calvin, in keeping with the salvation history or chronology of salvation perspective noted above, viewed the person and work of Jesus Christ not as the anchoring point out of which all our knowledge of God and all of God's dealings with humanity proceed, but as the culmination or capstone of an edifice long in the making. Within this context, his association of the natural knowledge of God that arises from the created world with the Law makes perfect sense. They both chronologically precede Jesus Christ and establish the conditions under which the salvation wrought by Jesus is effectual, namely, humanity recognizing its guilt for sin and need of salvation. The knowledge of sin is thus understood as necessarily prior to the knowledge of salvation.

Barth reverses this and instead bases "the knowledge of sin on the knowledge of Jesus Christ."<sup>49</sup> Because humanity can only know its sin in the light of God's self-revelation in Jesus

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<sup>48</sup> *KD I/2*, 335; *CD I/2*, 307: "As the self-offering and self-manifestation of God, revelation is the act by which in grace He reconciles man to Himself by grace." Gunton reinforces this close relation between revelation and reconciliation in Barth's thought: "Barth rightly sees that the shape of our knowledge of God must correspond to the covenantal relationship in which we stand...the knowledge of God, then, can become actual only as that fellowship with God is realised and restored by atonement." Colin E. Gunton, *Theology through the Theologians: Selected Essays, 1972-1995* (London: T&T Clark, 2003), 61.

<sup>49</sup> Eberhard Jüngel, *Karl Barth: A Theological Legacy*, trans. Garrett E. Paul (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1986), 116. This notion is found throughout Barth's writings. For instance, see Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/1, 219. Barth here argues that Jesus Christ as the Judge who is judged in our place "is the measure of all righteousness" and thus "reveals the full seriousness of the human situation." The revelation of God's wrath as

Christ, Barth can no longer understand the Law as functioning in any way as a preparation for salvation. Thus, for Barth, “the law or command of God flows from the gospel of God.”<sup>50</sup>

Calvin, as was noted above, maintains Luther’s view that the Law functions in just such a preparatory way, and it makes sense for Calvin to do so given his attention to the chronology of salvation. However, there are tendencies in Calvin that move more in Barth’s direction on this question as well. For instance, Calvin discusses the Law in his *Institutes* only after discussing the necessity of salvation through Christ. Furthermore, although Calvin adopts Luther’s two uses of the Law, he also adds a third – for him its “principle use” – that understands the Law as providing direction for the life of faith. Finally, Calvin interprets the preface to the Decalogue, and specifically the identification of God as the God of the Exodus, by saying that the Israelites “have been freed from miserable bondage that they may, in obedience and readiness to serve, worship him as the author of their freedom.” Here is recognition that God’s saving activity is prior to his commanding activity.<sup>51</sup>

There are other aspects of Calvin’s work that serve to bring him closer to Barth in overall outlook. For instance, Dowey has endeavored to show that Calvin’s theology is structured according to the two-fold knowledge of God as Creator and Redeemer. These two aspects of the knowledge of God are related in a dialectical but asymmetrical relationship. As Dowey explains it, “God the Redeemer must be recognized as God the Creator, but God the Creator is only known by those who know God as the Redeemer... Thus, the knowledge of the Redeemer is an

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the shadow side of the revelation of God’s righteousness in Jesus Christ, which has been encountered in Barth’s exegesis of Romans 1, is also relevant here.

<sup>50</sup> Jüngel, *Karl Barth*, 111.

<sup>51</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.6-8. Calvin discusses the necessity of salvation through Christ in 2.6, the functions of the Law in 2.7, and provides an explication of the Decalogue in 2.8. He treats the third use of the Law at 2.7.12, and the quote from Calvin’s explication of the Decalogue’s preface comes from 2.8.15. In light of all this it is interesting to note Battles’ interpretation of the *Institutes* as “constructed backward from the incarnation through the law, the Fall to the creation, from the second Adam to the first Adam.” Ford Lewis Battles, *Interpreting John Calvin*, ed. Robert Benedetto (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996), 132.

epistemological presupposition of the knowledge of the Creator.”<sup>52</sup> This reinforces the point noted in the earlier discussion of Calvin’s thought on these matters, namely, that the knowledge of God that arises on the basis of observing the created world has no positive benefit this side of the Fall. Further, it reminds us that Calvin’s *Institutes* cannot be read in such a way that would abstract it from the Christian outlook of its author or intended audience. Because “theology according to Calvin must be understood as solely and exclusively for believers,”<sup>53</sup> his comments concerning natural knowledge of God cannot be taken as statements about human ability independent of faith in Jesus Christ. In other words, the faithful interpreter of Calvin will treat his discussion of this material much as Barth treats Paul’s discussion of it in Romans 1.

It was noted above that Barth’s theological epistemology is patterned on justification by grace alone, which for Barth means Christ alone. What is interesting is that it is basically Calvin’s understanding of justification that Barth adapts. Calvin is assiduous in affirming that we in no way merit salvation: “righteousness according to grace is owed to faith. Therefore it does not arise from the merits of works.”<sup>54</sup> This statement in and of itself is unremarkable, at least among Protestants, because the act of faith could still be interpreted as something that lies within independent human ability to perform. Such a position thus seeks to bring in through the back door that which the front door has been barred against, namely, the notion that sinful humanity has something to contribute to salvation. Calvin will have none of this, however, as becomes clear when he explicates the process of justification that he sees in Scripture. This process begins when

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<sup>52</sup> Dowey, *Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology*, 238-9.

<sup>53</sup> Brian G. Armstrong, "Duplex Cognitio Dei, Or? The Problem and Relation of Structure, Form, and Purpose in Calvin's Theology," in *Probing the Reformed Tradition: Historical Studies in Honor of Edward A. Dowey, Jr.*, ed. Elsie Anne McKee and Brian G. Armstrong (Louisville, KY: Westminster, John Knox Press, 1989), 139.

<sup>54</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.11.13.



God deigns to embrace the sinner with his pure and freely given goodness, finding nothing in [the sinner] except his miserable condition...and so [God] seeks in himself the reason to benefit man. Then God touches the sinner...in order that he, despairing of his own works, may ground the whole of his salvation in God's mercy. This is the experience of faith through which the sinner comes into possession of his salvation.<sup>55</sup>

Calvin here makes it perfectly clear that God's work precedes the human response of faith, calling forth that response and communicating both the truth of the salvation offered in Jesus Christ as well as the need for that salvation. Furthermore, God's saving initiative is seen to depend only on God and not upon any favorable quality or ability that God sees in sinful humanity as such. Parallels to Barth's theological epistemology, where any independent human contribution to knowledge of God is rejected in favor of knowing God only in response to God's gracious self-revelation in Jesus Christ, are clear. Barth wrote in his response to Brunner that "we are not in a position to-day to repeat the statements of Luther and Calvin without at the same time making them more pointed than they themselves did," and he goes on to note that these thinkers did not see and attack "intellectual work-righteousness" with the same clarity and fervor as they did "moral work-righteousness." Barth further affirms that in view of Calvin's christology and understanding of justification, the affirmation of a true knowledge of God gained on a basis other than God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ should "really be impossible for Calvin."<sup>56</sup> This clearly suggests that Barth was to some degree attempting to make Calvin's theology more internally consistent in the realm of theological epistemology.

That Calvin did not himself apply his understanding of justification by grace to the knowledge of God is unfortunate. However, it is to be expected given his attention to the

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 3.11.16.

<sup>56</sup> Emil Brunner and Karl Barth, *Natural Theology: Comprising "Nature and Grace" By Professor Dr. Emil Brunner and the Reply "No!" By Dr. Karl Barth*, trans. Peter Fraenkel (London: The Centenary press, 1946), 101-2. This mitigates Chung's conclusion that Barth's "interpretation of Calvin gives on an impression that Barth may not be listening carefully to Calvin's argument" with reference to natural knowledge of God. Sung Wook Chung, *Admiration & Challenge: Karl Barth's Theological Relationship with John Calvin* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002), 170.

chronology of salvation, as well as to his rather common-sense reading of Romans 1.18-20. Indeed, it seems as though the thought simply failed to occur to Calvin as it did to Barth, who lived and worked in the wake of Kant and Feuerbach. Indeed, Bouwsma's judgment that there "was nothing original or otherwise remarkable" about Calvin's treatment of natural knowledge of God, and that Calvin "repeated commonplaces long available, especially those of Cicero,"<sup>57</sup> support this hypothesis. The whole question appears not to have especially exercised Calvin. And yet, the seriousness with which Calvin treated sin pushed him further along toward Barth in his treatment of the natural knowledge of God than his contemporaries, especially Melancthon. As Steinmetz has argued after comparing Calvin's exegesis of Romans 1.18-20 with treatments by his contemporaries, Calvin understood the human perception of the created world's witness to their Creator to be severely impaired after the Fall, while his contemporaries argued instead that perception remains unimpaired although the knowledge of God arising thereby is willfully distorted.<sup>58</sup>

### **Concluding Constructive Proposal**

By way of conclusion, I would like to offer a brief constructive proposal aimed at demarcating a way of thinking about the created world's witness to its Creator that would at least be acceptable from both Calvin and Barth's perspective, although undoubtedly each would have further things to say on the topic. My proposal is based on a metaphor that both theologians use with reference to creation, namely, that creation is a theater. For instance, Calvin notes that it is fitting for humanity to "contemplate God's works, since [we] have been placed in this most glorious theater

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<sup>57</sup> William J. Bouwsma, *John Calvin: A Sixteenth-Century Portrait* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 103.

<sup>58</sup> See Steinmetz, *Calvin in Context*, 31.

to be a spectator of them.”<sup>59</sup> On Barth’s side, the metaphor appears literally throughout the *Church Dogmatics*. For instance, in II/1 Barth writes that God has established creation “*zum Schauplatz seines Tuns bestimmt und darum aus dem Nichts geschaffen hat und noch erhält und regiert.*”<sup>60</sup>

The benefit of this metaphor is twofold. First, a theater is an edifice that facilitates something else. It provides the context or the location for a dramatic event that is itself meaningful, but the theater itself does not contribute to that meaning in any direct way. Second, a theater is – in and of itself – inert, or perhaps better, mute. It does not produce or communicate meaning greater than that aesthetic value with which it may or may not be imbued in its construction. But this is a decidedly self-contained meaning that does not correspond necessarily or directly to the meaning of the dramatic events that take place within it. In this way, the metaphor corresponds to Barth’s formulation concerning the relation between creation and covenant: “*die Schöpfung als den äußeren Grund des Bundes, den Bund als den inneren Grund der Schöpfung.*”<sup>61</sup> A theater establishes the space for the play, and the play establishes the meaning of the theater.

In understanding the created world as the theater on whose stage the drama of God’s relationship with humanity is played out incorporates important emphases of both Barth and Calvin’s exegesis of Romans 1, although it admittedly strains the textual meaning of verse 20. Calvin’s emphasis on humanity’s guilt from failing to properly worship God is maintained, because the whole world has always been the spectator of this drama. If there is one thing that the book of Genesis seeks to impress upon us it is that God has never been a time when God did

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<sup>59</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.6.2.

<sup>60</sup> *KD* II/1, 482; *CD* II/1, 428: “as a theatre for His action and therefore created it out of nothing and still preserves and governs it.”

<sup>61</sup> *KD* IV/1, 28; *CD* IV/1, 27: “Creation is the outward basis of the covenant and the covenant the inward basis of creation.”

not establish relationships with certain individuals and peoples. This further maintains Calvin's interest in the chronology of salvation. Similarly, Barth's emphasis that it is only on the basis of God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ that the meaning of the theater – and, indeed, the meaning of the whole drama and its spectator / participants – becomes known is maintained, despite the presence of foreshadowing throughout the opening acts of the drama. Although it cannot itself offer even the slightest part of the revelation and reconciliation offered by Jesus Christ on its stage, through God's presence on its stage “*da wird die Natur selber zum Schauplatz der Gnade.*”<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> *KD* II/1, 572; *CD* II/1, 509: “Nature itself becomes the theatre of grace.”

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